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Letter dated 30 May 2002 from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Nauru to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the pleasure to enclose the report of the 2002 Review of the Pacific Islands Forum Communications Action Plan (see annex). The ministers responsible for communications from Forum member countries met in Suva on 17 April 2002 to review the 1999 Forum Communications Action Plan and to consider policy issues associated with information and communications technologies (ICTs). The ministers considered associated issues, including capacities in Pacific Island countries to handle ICTs, regional cooperation on technologies and policy formulation, legal and regulatory frameworks for telecommunications and ICTs at the national, regional and international level, and the role of ICTs in the development of the region.

Attached, as an annex to the report, is the full text of the Pacific Islands Information and Communication Technologies Policy and Strategic Plan, entitled "Information and communication technologies for every Pacific Islander".*

It is requested that the report and its annex be issued as documents of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly, under agenda item 12, entitled "Report of the Economic and Social Council", and included in the documentation to be issued for the upcoming meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development, to be held on 17 and 18 June 2002 (as per resolution 56/258).

(*Signed*) Fredrick W. **Pitcher**
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Chargé d'affaires a.i.
Permanent Mission of Nauru

* The annex to the report will be made available to interested delegations in the General Assembly Hall during the meeting on 17 and 18 June 2002 by the Mission of Nauru.

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PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT

SECOND FORUM COMMUNICATION POLICY MINISTERIAL MEETING

Forum Secretariat, Suva

17 April 2002

FORUM COMMUNICATIONS ACTION PLAN – 2002 REVIEW

1. Ministers responsible for communications from Forum member countries met in Suva on 17 April 2002 to review the 1999 Forum Communications Action Plan and to consider policy issues associated with information and communications technologies (ICTs).

2. The continued rapid development and convergence of ICTs provide opportunities and challenges for Pacific island countries in taking advantage of globalisation, including new forms of economic and social development in which traditional disadvantages of remoteness and small size could be less relevant. The opportunities will be particularly important in improving the prospects for the youth and future generations of the region. Ministers adopted as a theme for their work:

ICT for Every Pacific Islander

3. This being the second meeting of Forum Communications Ministers, the opportunity was taken to review the Forum Communications Action Plan formulated at their first meeting, in Suva on 26 April 1999. Ministers also considered associated issues, including capacities in Pacific island countries to handle ICTs, regional cooperation on technologies and policy formulation, legal and regulatory frameworks for telecommunications and ICTs at the national, regional and international level, the role of ICT in the development of the region, and the development of telecommunication and ICT strategies at the national and regional level.

4. The deliberations of, and decisions by, Ministers are set out below.

Communication Action Plan 1999

5. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to implementation of the 1999 Forum Communications Action Plan, though noted that progress to date in its

implementation has depended on domestic capacities and national priorities against the broader policy issues faced by each country.

6. Nonetheless, for many countries access has improved and some prices have fallen. For others, however, problems remain with limited and unequal access to ICTs, high costs of equipment and services, insufficient telecommunications bandwidth, low investment in networks, and a limited number of Internet Service Providers. In addition regulatory frameworks at the national level have not kept up with the pace of technological development and in many cases are outdated and incomplete.

7. Consequently, Ministers recognised the importance of continually monitoring implementation of the Forum Communications Action Plan and agreed that the stocktake process initiated in preparation for their meeting provides an effective means of monitoring the Action Plan. Accordingly they agreed that:

- the decisions encapsulated in the 1999 Communications Action Plan serve as a concise reference point for the stocktake process;
- greater efforts be made in data collection, with the assistance of, and in collaboration with, PITA and that the data be posted to a website;
- there be a renewed effort at assessing implementation of the Action Plan, in collaboration with PITA and request that PITA provide an opportunity at its annual meetings for progressing this work; and
- the findings be used to identify ways to improve national and regional policy formulation.

ICT Capacity in the Pacific Region

8. Ministers noted the findings of the Survey on ICT Capacity in the region. While the Survey showed that more Pacific islanders are being trained in ICT-related fields than ever before, human resources and capacity in the PICs still remain limited, a situation that makes progress in developing use of ICTs more difficult. Other common barriers include the high costs of equipment and telecommunication services, limited access to networks, a small number of Internet service providers, and availability and cost of telecommunications bandwidth.

9. Ministers agreed to use the survey findings in the assessment of national ICT development plans and that continued access to complete and accurate information is required for this. However, despite several recent ambitious efforts at data collection existing data are incomplete. Accordingly Ministers directed that the collection of information on ICT capacity in the region be continued in conjunction with collecting information on the implementation of the 1999 Action Plan.

Report on Technological and Policy Co-operation

10. Ministers noted the work of the ICT Working Group under the auspices of the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) and welcomed the consequent regional co-operation mechanisms that have evolved to the benefit of both member governments and regional organisations through the provision of unbiased and constructive technical advice and assistance for policy development and planning.

11. Ministers agreed that strong networking is required to ensure all stakeholders remain up-to-date on technologies and to ensure assistance on policy formulation and implementation is given to Forum island countries, and request officials to:

- consider regular country participation in the annual technical meetings; and
- take advantage of the resources of the CROP ICT Working Group and PITA to assist with national ICT issues and developments.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

12. Ministers recognised that the effects of technology convergence and the evolution of the international operating environment mean that traditional institutional and policy approaches to communications must adapt to rapid and sweeping change. At their 1st Forum Communications Policy Meeting Ministers had encouraged the creation of flexible policy and regulatory environments favourable to the development of the Pacific information economy.

13. They noted that development of national legal and regulatory frameworks is the goal of the Pacific Governance project being implemented by the ITU, which will provide expert services to develop national sector policy and a regulatory framework, thus addressing the need to review and revise existing regulatory frameworks. Accordingly ministers:

- directed that information on the Pacific Governance Project be forwarded to responsible national organisations to promote cross-sectoral participation in the development of a national telecommunications sector policy; and
- noted the activities and schedule of the Pacific Governance Project and supported the formation of a national team to work with their delegated national representative on the Pacific Governance project.

Tariff Issues

14. The 1999 Forum Communications Action Plan recognised that tariff re-balancing needs to be considered to achieve economic efficiency, and supported the Forum Economic Ministers' Meeting (FEMM) call to discourage unwarranted cross-subsidisation. However, Ministers noted that, in the context of the economic environment of each country, cross-subsidisation provides a means of supporting universal access. While agreeing that each country should deal with the issue in their own way and time, Ministers also agreed to:

- consider tariff rebalancing in more depth in collaboration with other relevant Ministries, bearing in mind the burden of cross-subsidisation on some sectors but also the desire to provide universal access.
- encourage carriers to explain the case behind current and proposed tariff regimes when considering changes through regulation.

Extension of PICTA to trade in services

15. Ministers noted that when Forum Trade Ministers met in Apia, Samoa in June 2001 to consider the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA), they also endorsed in principle the introduction of services, possibly including telecommunications. Ministers agreed to ensure that the telecommunications and

ICT sectors be represented in national trade negotiations teams to ensure representation of telecommunications issues.

International Settlements and Internet Charging

16. Forum Communication Ministers decided in 1999 that Forum island countries need to monitor developments and participate actively in international fora to promote equitable pricing, consider the broader interests of consumers and economic development, and promote access principles that encourage the development of Internet infrastructure and services.

17. Ministers noted that with both international charging arrangements for Internet service (ICAIS) and international settlements for telecommunications, problems have arisen due to international settlement arrangements. The US industry is unilaterally setting international prices without regard to their effect on FIC carriers and consumers, and the net effect is a subsidy from the Pacific to the US. This has contributed to high telecommunications, including internet, costs.

18. Ministers agreed that in order to further promote the interest of the region in this respect they:

- encourage service providers and industry stakeholders to make data available to the PITA Working Group;
- support joint regional representations on these issues at every opportunity; and
- agree that the Forum Secretariat, in collaboration with PITA, submit an information paper on international settlements and internet charging to the Forum.

Regional Cooperation in Communication Regulation

19. Ministers recalled that in contrast to the rapidly changing technological and international environments, most national legislative and regulatory frameworks are outdated and insufficient. They noted that all Forum island countries face financial limits and shortages of skilled personnel in the ICT sector to address these, but also have developed varying levels of knowledge and experience that collectively represent a regional pool of expertise. If combined in complementary ways, a regional approach to regulation would be an effective way to leverage the abilities within each country.

20. Accordingly Ministers agreed to information exchange, through PITA as the clearinghouse, and that this mechanism also be used to work toward harmonisation of national legislation and regulations.

International Developments in Internet governance

21. Ministers noted that the administration of some country code top level domains (ccTLDs) can provide a valuable state asset. Under the existing system, ultimate authority to designate a ccTLD manager does not necessarily rest with the countries to which that ccTLD refers, a situation that has led to considerable dissatisfaction for some countries. They further noted that ICAAN is currently considering a radical restructuring and this makes it important to take advantage of opportunities for engagement with the international internet governance system.

22. Accordingly Ministers directed that the Forum Secretariat monitor developments at meetings of the ICANN Government Advisory Committee and ccTLDs, and inform member countries of developments in these fora.

ICT and Development

23. Ministers noted that the Pacific region has seen rapid progress in the development of Internet applications with immediate relevance to island countries. Of particular note are the developments in telehealth, which promise to bring advances in health care to previously under-served areas, and the availability of appropriate technologies for remote and rural access to telecommunications and information services through such approaches as satellite and wireless services to community telecentres.

24. Given the importance of extending services to all areas of Pacific island countries as a top priority, Ministers agreed to encourage the sharing of relevant information with national stakeholders to initiate programmes for greater Internet use in the community.

Strategic Planning

25. Ministers noted the recent inception of a UNDP/UNOPS project that will build upon national priorities and existing plans through in-country assistance in the development of national ICT strategies through national workshops. They recognised that an important feature of the project are the criteria for participation which include the existence of a Minister responsible for ICT, a multi-stakeholder committee to oversee progress, and staff responsible for implementation within government. Member countries agreed that high level support was critical for the success of this initiative and Ministers directed officials to disseminate information to responsible national organisations to promote cross-sectoral participation in the development of national ICT strategies.

Regional ICT Policy and Strategic Action Plan

26. Ministers noted that the CROP Working Group is tasked with enhancing co-ordination and co-operation in ICT in the region and for ensuring that priority areas are adequately addressed and that in fulfillment of this mandate the Working Group initiated a regional strategic planning exercise. In pursuit of this a Pacific Information and Communication Technologies Needs Assessment and Strategy Planning Workshop was held in August 2001 in Noumea, New Caledonia, attended by representatives of Pacific islands countries and territories, regional organisations, and multilateral agencies and bilateral development partners.

27. Ministers further noted that the proposed Pacific Islands ICT Policy and Strategic Plan can be considered as both a regional policy, in areas where co-operation is required, and as guidelines for national action, in areas for domestic implementation and agreed to:

- adopt the Pacific Islands ICT Policy and Strategic Plan;
- note that it should be linked to the Regional Energy Policy and Plan;
- direct the members of the CROP ICT Working group, in consultation with members countries, to conduct regular reviews and updating of the Plan.